

# President's Report for year-end 2008

## Introduction

I am honored to offer to you my fifth Annual Report as President of the Newton Board of Aldermen. I want to thank my colleagues for the honor and responsibility of serving them, and the City, as President of the Board of Aldermen during this last year.

Indeed, no one in the role of Board President can succeed alone. I especially appreciated the advice and assistance of Vice-President **Scott Lennon** and President Emeritus **Verne Vance**, as well as of our Comptroller, **David Wilkinson**, and our City Clerk and Clerk of the Board, **David Olson**, and his staff: **Linda Finucane, Christine Owen, Shawna Sullivan, Karyn Dean, Rosalie Myers and Danielle Delaney**. Together this team is responsible for facilitating communication amongst Board members, and with the public on behalf of the Board, including helping with this report. They also assemble the dockets, agendas and reports of items for the Board to consider, prepare the board orders, revise or create new ordinances that result from Board actions, and staff the various Board Committees.

While we can be proud of the Board's accomplishments during the last year, we still have much to do. What I am about to say is not news to the members of the Board, but many Newton citizens may not fully understand the important role the Board plays in City Government and the many actions we take that affect the quality of life in Newton. Therefore, the purpose of this Report is:

- To inform citizens about the Board's role and describe some of what the Board has done in the last year;
- To acknowledge some of the many valued colleagues in city government who have helped the Board to do its work; and
- To highlight some of the matters that the Board of Aldermen will take up this coming year.

## Background on the Newton Board of Aldermen

While the Mayor is the Chief Executive of the City, it is worth remembering that the City Charter provides that "...Except as otherwise provided by law or the Charter, all powers of the City shall be vested in the Board of Aldermen..."

Those powers are exercised by the Board in reviewing and approving city expenditures, setting the tax rate for residential and commercial properties, and shaping land use policy for the City. For example, in 2008 the Board funded the remaining cost of Newton North High School, new playing fields for Newton South High School, new parkland next to Crystal Lake, and new water meters to assure more accurate readings. It also co-appointed a Citizen Advisory Group to study the City's finances, and approved important amendments to our zoning our zoning and historic ordinances to make them work better, as well as land use special permits for new development.

While we aldermen may differ on policy from time to time, we are united in our concern for the welfare of the citizens of Newton. Our city has long stood for excellence in public services and education, and our challenge is to find ways to maintain and even enhance Newton's excellence in a time of difficult economic times, fiscal constraint, and transition to new leadership for the City.

With a large Board, we cannot succeed in that effort without first allocating our work among a number of smaller standing or special committees whose members and leaders are appointed by the President at the beginning of each aldermanic term. These committees in turn report to the Board as a whole for final action. I therefore want to acknowledge my colleagues who lead and serve on these committees because the Board's success is the result of its collective effort, rather than any of my own.

I especially want to acknowledge those colleagues who have not served this year in formal leadership roles, but who have helped the Board succeed in other ways.

First, **Allan Ciccone, Jr.**, a first-term Alderman-at-large from Ward One, who serves on the Zoning and Planning, Public Safety and Community Preservation Committees. He has a background in public safety which has been important to us all. Second, **Amy Mah Sangiolo**, Alderman-at-large from Ward Four, who serves on the Land Use, Programs and Services, and Community Preservation Committees of the Board. She had previously ably served as Board Vice-President before stepping down last year, but still helps keep us focused on important issues.

So how has the Board exercised its powers during the last year?

## **The work of the Committees of the Board**

In 2008, the Board of Aldermen tackled many issues that had and will have a significant impact on the City of Newton. The work on each of these items began in one of the Board's Committees where it was reviewed and discussed, and where appropriate, a recommendation was then made to the full Board of Aldermen. To present a complete list of all of the work that each committee undertook this past year would take several volumes. Instead, I will highlight several items of note from the nine regular committees and one special committee in the order in which they make reports to the full Board under our rules. Note that some items appear in more than one committee because they often look at different aspects.

### **Land Use Committee**

First to report at Board meetings is the **Land Use Committee**, which makes recommendations on zoning special permits and site plans for land development. This past year the Committee Chairman was **George Mansfield** and the Vice-chairman was **Mitch Fischman**. The Committee Clerk was **Linda Finucane**. Many staff members, including Associate City Solicitor **Ouida Young**, Chief Planner **Candace Havens**, Associate City Engineer **John Daghlian** and Traffic Engineer **Clint Schuckel**, supported the work of the Committee.

### **Special Permits**

In 2008, the Committee reviewed thirty-six zoning special permit petitions, ranging from simple signs to 62 units of housing sited on a 14-acre wooded parcel on LaGrange Street adjacent to the city-owned Kessler Woods open space.

Other petitions approved include such projects as:

- Converting a former junkyard site in a residential neighborhood into four units of housing.
- A new two-story red brick building on Washington Street designed with architectural features to that both reflect and complement the adjacent Armory and the old Mayflower Furniture building.
- Permission for Newton Wellesley Hospital to use shell space approved in 2005 for 24 additional inpatient beds, as well as a renovated nursing and rehabilitation facility.
- A renovated Filene's Basement, though at the writing of this report the permit is under appeal by a commercial abutter.

## Board Rules

The Committee sponsored two successful changes to the Rules and Orders of the Board of Aldermen.

- Allowing more than one night each month for land use to assign public hearings. This change should help offer alternatives when holidays make hearings infeasible.
- Establishing a rule for posting signs on the site of special permit application so that neighbors can be aware that an application for zoning relief is pending and likely to be the subject of a public hearing before the Land Use Committee of the Board.

## Zoning and Planning Committee

Next is the **Zoning and Planning Committee**, in charge of writing and revising our zoning and historic ordinances. The Committee's Chairman was **Brian Yates** and the Vice-chairman was **Jay Harney**. Many staff members, including Assistant City Solicitor **Marie Lawlor**, Director of Planning and Development **Mike Kruse**, new City Planner **Jen Molinsky**, and Board staff **Linda Finucane** supported the work of the Committee.

## Zoning Task Force

In 2006, the Committee appointed a Zoning Task Force, chaired by Alderman **Ted Hess-Mahan**, comprised also of citizens, including local architects, developers, and attorneys to look at revising several aspects of Newton's zoning ordinances considered problematic by the Commissioner of Inspectional Services.

The provisions discussed involved how to respond to the partial demolition of structures, changes of more than three feet in the grade of properties, small changes to nonconforming buildings, and rules for half-stories and dormers. The Task Force reported to the Committee in the spring of 2007, but the Committee's workload precluded holding public hearings until 2008.

The Committee recommended and the Board approved amending the definitions of "half-story" and "height" as well as adding a definition of "dormer," to avoid adding full stories to structures without seeming to be doing so. The Committee anticipates holding a second set of public hearings on the 3-foot grade change modifications and the partial demolition rules in January. The other items are still under review.

## **Demolition Delay Ordinance Amendments**

In response to citizens, Aldermen, and members of the Historical Commission, the Committee instigated and the Board approved amendments to the Demolition Delay Ordinance. The amendments codified administrative practice in a way that helped reduce the number of owners of properties over fifty years old who had to seek permission from the Historical Commission for possible demolition of properties or parts of properties which are obviously not historic. Prior to the amendments, the number of delays subject to review were up to thirty a month, now it is more like three a month.

## **Wireless Communication and Home Businesses**

The Committee's workload also included developing an ordinance for wireless communication equipment (WiFi) for utilization by the city for its communications systems should the occasion arise.

Most recently, the Committee reviewed amendments proposed by the Planning and Development Board to the home business ordinance, a process that will continue into January.

## **Programs and Services Committee**

The **Programs and Services Committee** looks after Newton's Schools, our Parks and Recreation Facilities, and our Library, as well as our Aldermanic Rules and staff. The Chairman is **Marcia Johnson** and the Vice-Chairman is **John Freedman**. The Committee is supported by Committee Clerk **Karyn Dean**. The Committee relied on many city staff, including Commissioner **Fran Towle** and **Carol Stapleton** from the Parks and Recreation Department; from the Law Department City Solicitor **Dan Funk**, and Assistant Solicitor **Marie Lawlor**; from the Health Department Commissioner **David Naparstek**; and also members of the **School Committee**.

## **Master Plan for Crystal Lake**

The Programs & Services Committee worked in conjunction with the Public Facilities and Finance Committees on the funding for the development of a master plan for Crystal Lake, the City's natural outdoor swimming area. Since the City had recently acquired two new parcels of land abutting the existing City land, one at 20 Rogers Street and a second next door at 230 Lake Avenue, the Crystal Lake Task Force felt that an overall plan should be developed to find the best design for the area including the Bathhouse and related environmental, structural, and parking issues. A gift of \$15,000 from the Newton Conservators was accepted as part of the financing for this study.

## **Guaranteed Maximum Price for NNHS**

With the cost of the new Newton North High School rising, many aldermen and citizens felt the need for more accountability and transparency in the process. Some members of the Board docketed several items that came before the Programs & Services Committee in order to address the complicated issues involved with such a large project and its increasing cost. The primary focus of these discussions was to seek a thoughtful approach to understanding, managing and controlling the costs involved, including the City's financing plan, with input, if feasible, from the State Treasurer. It is therefore

gratifying that the long sought Guaranteed Maximum Price has been delivered to the City and the new high school can be seen rising in Newtonville.

### **Branch Libraries**

The tightening in the FY09 budget forced many difficult choices in the City's departments. One of the most deeply felt in the community was the closing of the City's remaining four branch libraries. The Programs & Services Committee carefully questioned and analyzed the data that brought about the decision to close the libraries in an effort to discern if any other option would have been available. While opinions of committee members varied widely on this issue, ultimately, the branches were to remain closed and a solution had to be found to meet the community's needs. The Committee worked closely with the Mayor's office to keep the books in the branch library buildings. Now, community leaders have come forward with plans to operate the branches in a public/private partnership with the full cooperation of the City. With the energy of volunteers, support from the City, and the enthusiasm of neighborhood residents, this new kind of cooperative venture holds promise for success.

### **Citizen Advisory Group**

In response to the budget problems being faced by the City this year, the Programs & Services Committee recommended a Resolution to the Board to appoint a citizen advisory group to study the City's finances. The President of the Board, the Mayor, and the Chair of the School Committee were charged with finding able and expert citizen volunteers to look at all possible means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the municipal and school departments. In response, as Board President, I worked with **Mayor David Cohen** and School Committee Chair **Dori Zaleznik** to appoint a distinguished panel of thirteen citizens called the Citizen Advisory Group. The CAG, as it has become known in shorthand, has issued or will issue reports on the areas of City revenues, school and municipal cost structure, capital structure, and decision and control. We were pleased to hear a preliminary report by CAG leaders **Malcolm Salter and Ruthanne Fuller** and several of their colleagues earlier this fall.

### **Fair Housing Committee**

Newton has had a Fair Housing Task Force which developed an action plan to facilitate the City of Newton in being a welcoming community, free of housing discrimination to new residents. The plan is very much designed to be collaborative and work in concert with real estate professionals, social services providers, government representatives, and citizens to carry out the missions for education, outreach, and vigilance on enforcement. The Programs & Services committee agreed that this was important work and approved a resolution requesting that a permanent citizen Fair Housing Committee be established to carry out the goals identified in the Fair Housing Action Plan prepared by the Task Force.

### **Alternative to Pesticide Month Resolution**

The Green Decade Coalition started a program to claim March as Alternative to Pesticide Month many years ago because of concern about the impact of chemical pesticides on the environment. The City of Newton was a leader in using an integrated pest management approach beginning in 1997. The Programs & Services Committee voted to approve a Resolution to show support for the good work of the Green Decade Coalition and to bring attention to this issue in time for spring planting. As the world

community becomes more and more concerned about the health of the earth, the City of Newton stands as a model for greener methodologies.

## **Public Safety and Transportation Committee**

The **Public Safety and Transportation Committee** reviews matters relating to the Police Department, Fire Department and Civil Defense Department, Traffic Engineer, Traffic Council, parking ordinances, taxis, buses, public transportation and utility petitions relating to specific traffic signals.

The Public Safety Committee Chairman this past year was **Stephen M. Linsky** and its Vice-Chairman was **Victoria Danberg**. Committee Clerks **Christine Owen** and **Danielle Delaney** supported the Committee. The work of the Public Safety & Transportation Committee was supported in 2008 by many City staff members including Public Works Department Traffic Engineer **Clint Schuckel**; Traffic Planner **David Koses**; Police Department personnel including Police Chief **John J. O'Brien**, Capt. **Matthew Cummings** and Officer **Paul Bianchi**; Fire Department personnel including Fire Chief **Joseph LaCroix**; and City Solicitor **Dan Funk**, with his staff Associate City Solicitor **Marie Lawlor**.

### **Approval of the First Pedestrian-Actuated Warning Signal**

In January 2008, the Public Safety & Transportation Committee approved the first pedestrian-actuated warning signal at the hazardous intersection of Crafts Street and Linwood Avenue where a crosswalk already exists. This signal will only light up when a pedestrian is using it to cross the street. This type of signal has been used by other communities and has been an effective means of increasing pedestrian safety, without the cost of installing a full stop light. Signals are also intended for Waverley Avenue and other locations around the City as recommended by the Traffic Council.

### **Approval to Purchase Fire Department Ladder Truck & Six Support Vehicles**

In April and December of 2008, the Public Safety & Transportation Committee reviewed and recommended approval of the purchase of new Fire Department vehicles, including one new ladder truck to replace a 1985 model. The new ladder truck will be a custom-built 105' rear mount Pierce brand ladder truck, with new technology which will allow firefighters the capability of changing the way they are fighting a fire by using either foam and/or water. Six additional vehicles will replace old and high mileage automobiles, including a Ford Expedition, three Ford Focuses, and two Ford Tauruses.

### **Walking School Bus Program**

A key element of this program involved the establishment of multiple routes for "walking buses," parent volunteers who walk a specific route which children join along the way. This program helped to encourage the use of walking school buses and other methods to facilitate walking to elementary schools, reducing vehicular congestion around schools and surrounding neighborhoods while promoting exercise to combat rising obesity in young people. The Board of Alderman passed a resolution on October 6, 2008 in support of International Walk to School Day. On October 8, 2008, approximately thirteen of the fifteen elementary schools, accompanied by members of the Board, participated in the International Walk to School Day. A Walk to School Task Force is working to establish and publicize a citywide monthly walk to school day.

## Implementation of Field Trials

In October 2008, the Public Safety & Transportation Committee approved the implementation of a Field Trials Ordinance which will allow the City the capability to give adequate advance notice to people traveling within the City of Newton that a field trial of a traffic or parking restriction will be taking place. The hope is to avoid future accidents or confusion by specifying an approximate time period for the duration of the trial. The Ordinance also states that streets must be returned to the original condition if a trial traffic or parking configuration is not adopted.

## Traffic Council

The Board of Aldermen was represented on the Traffic Council in 2008 by Alderman **Victoria Danberg** who joined Assistant Traffic Engineer **Nina Wang**, Resident Member **Jerome Grafe**, Transportation Planner **David Koses** (Chair of the Council), and **Sgt. James Norcross** of the Newton Police Department's Traffic Division, to review site-specific traffic and parking issues. The Council was supported by Committee Clerk **Rosalie Myers**.

## Accomplishments in 2008

Improved raised crosswalks have been installed on Woodland Road in the vicinity of Lasell College. The Council continues to discuss traffic calming guidelines. Traffic studies are being conducted at Jackson and Daniel Streets. In 2008 the Traffic Council adopted two new policies, the first provides guidance to the Council and the public on requests for changes to on-street parking ordinances. The second policy provides guidance on the criteria used by the Traffic Council to approve Residential Handicap Parking Spaces. There has been a major traffic pattern change at Lowell Ave/Walnut/Watertown Street and Lowell Avenue between Crafts and Walnut Streets. The Traffic Council recommended the installation of two pedestrian activated crossing lights as indicated earlier.

## Public Facilities Committee

The **Public Facilities Committee** is involved in roads, trash collection, snow plowing, water & sewer service, utility lines, and public buildings, including new or renovated schools. The Chairman of the Public Facilities Committee is **Sydra Schnipper** and the Vice-chairman is **Anthony Salvucci**. The Committee is staffed by **Shawna Sullivan** of the Clerk's Office. The work of the Public Facilities Committee was supported by Public Buildings Commissioner **Nick Parnell**, Public Works Commissioner **Tom Daley**, City Engineer **Lou Taverna**, and from the Mayor's Office, **Sandy Pooler** and **Susan Burstein**.

## Water Meters

The Public Facilities Committee discussed and approved \$12.5 million for new water meters and automated water-meter reading systems this past year. It is important that the water meter system be replaced with an automated system, as access to properties for a meter read is becoming more difficult due to heightened security and the availability of the homeowner. The new meter readers will be a significant improvement as only two of the five old meter readers are working and the manufacturer no longer services them. Currently, the Public Works Department is working on selecting the best water meter system for the City.

## **Energy Savings**

In 2007, the Committee had several discussions and presentations regarding the benefits of hiring energy service companies for possible energy improvements and cost savings within City buildings. This year the Committee reviewed and approved \$2 million for the costs related to energy savings improvements to be undertaken by NORESCO, an Energy Services Company, at the F.A. Day Middle School. NORESCO has performed an energy audit at Day Middle School and identified several long-term energy saving opportunities. They include improvements to the equipment, electrical and mechanical systems within the school, and the replacement of the rooftop HVAC units. These improvements should generate savings in excess of \$100,000 a year.

## **Newton South HVAC System**

The Committee received an update on the commissioning of the Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning System at Newton South High School. The Public Buildings Department created a new HVAC Engineer position within the department and hired Joshua Morse. The first task assigned to Mr. Morse was to address the HVAC issues at Newton South High School that were included in the commissioning report provided by RDK Engineers. The commissioning of the HVAC system at Newton South High School has been completed. Mr. Morse has reduced work orders by over 95%, reduced the maintenance costs by 98%, and trained the staff at Newton South on the system.

## **Improved Recreation fields at Newton South**

The Public Facilities Committee and the Programs and Services Committee worked together to review and approve plans for two synthetic multi-purpose fields, a natural turf baseball field and a natural turf softball field at Newton South High School. The new fields will alleviate drainage issues at the school and create a much more playable sports area for both the students and the community. The Committees decided that a two-part process would be beneficial and provide the opportunity to review plans before installation of the fields. The Committees approved \$300,000 for design money for the fields and storm water management in July. The Committees met jointly in December, reviewed the plans, cost estimates, and drainage plans for the site, and approved \$4,769,783 for the installation of the fields.

## **Newton North Updates**

The Committee has received bi-monthly reports on the progress of the Newton North Construction Project from Aldermen Gentile and Schnipper. The reports include all aspects of the construction, such as the guaranteed maximum price for the project, the traffic improvements for Walnut Street and Elm Road, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, the cost saving changes to the design of the theater, and many other pieces of the project. The Committee has been joined by the architect, Dorr & Whittier, for discussion on the changes in the architectural services being provided to the City. In addition, the Project Manager, Turner Construction, recently spoke with the Committee regarding their scope of services to the City. The project is on schedule for completion by the start of the September 2010 school year.



## **Bencliffe Circle**

The Public Facilities Committee approved the laying out, grading, and acceptance of Bencliffe Circle as a public way. The residents had requested several years ago to have the street accepted as a public way, but the City did not have the funds to dedicate to reconstructing the road. A few years ago, the Board of Aldermen approved an ordinance to give residents the option of paying for the reconstruction of the road and sidewalks by City crews, and the residents of Bencliffe Circle took advantage of this opportunity.

## **Finance Committee**

The **Finance Committee** reviews requests related to Budget review and transfers, policy oversight and review, capital improvements, and matters relating to the Assessing Department, Parking Fine Administration, City Treasurer and Collector, City Comptroller, Accounting Department, Purchasing Department, Executive Office, Personnel Department, and IT Department.

The Finance Committee's Chairman this past year was **Paul E. Coletti** and its Vice-Chairman was **Leonard J. Gentile**. Committee Clerks **Christine Owen** and **Danielle Delaney** supported the Committee. The work of the Finance Committee was supported in 2008 by many City staff members, including Comptroller **David Wilkinson**, Treasurer/Collectors **Edward Spellman** and **James Reardon**, Chief Budget Officer **Susan Burstein**, Chief Administrative Officer **Sandy Pooler**, Director of Assessing **Elizabeth Dromey**, City Solicitor **Dan Funk**, with his staff Associate City Solicitor **Ouida Young**, the Public Works Department, the Police Department including Police Chief **John J. O'Brien**, Fire Department including Fire Chief **Joseph LaCroix**, Parks and Recreation Department Commissioner **Fran Towle**, Committee on Community Preservation Program Manager **Alice Ingerson**, and Public Buildings Department Commissioner **Nick Parnell**.

## **Financing the Newton North High School**

At the beginning of the year, the Finance Committee reviewed the Newton North High School proposed financing plan, including discussing the importance of achieving a guaranteed maximum price for completion of this project with Dimeo Construction, the Construction Manager at Risk chosen for the project. Committee members also stressed the importance of going out to bid so that sub-contractors could be selected and the City could take advantage of a downturn in the construction market, perhaps reducing the cost of the project, as well as making timely application to the Massachusetts School Building Assistance Program (MSBA) for \$46.6 million in state reimbursements on this project. We have learned that the first installment has now been received. Earlier this year the Board voted the final authorization for a total of \$197.5 million to assure completion of this project.

The Finance Committee also asked Alderman Gentile to chair a subcommittee to provide review and updates to the Finance Committee on the expenditures on the Newton North High School project. He was also instrumental in including a schedule of sub-accounts for expenditures in the final bond issue which will be monitored by the Board and reviewed if transfers are needed.

### **Newton South High School Fields and Drainage**

The Finance Committee also continued to move forward on the replacement and restoration of the fields at Newton South High School, as described earlier. The Committee proposed that \$300,000 be allocated for the architectural and design work of the new fields and at the same time requested that funds from Capital Stabilization in the amount of \$2.3 million be set aside for the drainage work, which needed to be done in conjunction with the renovation of the fields.

The Finance Committee continued to work with the Public Facilities Committee to establish the total cost of the project at approximately \$5.1 million and was active in establishing a special account with \$500,000 of seed money in order to provide a fund for the long term maintenance of the fields. As noted earlier, ultimately, the Programs and Services, Public Facilities and Finance Committees agreed on a design plan, which includes an all purpose synthetic turf field, a combination football and track field with synthetic turf, and regular grass softball and baseball fields.

### **Fire Department Contract**

The Finance Committee also worked with the Executive Department to urge a good faith settlement of the Fire Department's labor contract which had been unsettled for five years, including arbitration. After reviewing the joint labor relations arbitration settlement, the Finance Committee worked quickly to approve the payout of over \$6 million in retroactive salaries for both retired and active employees.

### **Override, Fiscal Year 09 Budget and Setting of the Tax Rate**

In April and May 2008, the Finance Committee was deeply involved in reviewing proposals for both an operating and a debt exclusion property tax over-ride, reducing the amount of the initial recommendation by the Mayor. The Committee assisted the Board in presenting a general override request of \$12 million to the voters in May, while a budget was set forth based upon no override being passed. When the override did not succeed at a special election, the Committee worked with the Executive Department on the continued review of the fiscal year 2009 budget of over \$300 million, as well as ultimately setting the relative share of taxes paid by commercial and residential property.

More specifically, from May through June 15, the Finance Committee Chairman served as the moderator of the Committee of the Whole to review the budget. The Committee of the Whole worked diligently up to the deadline, but at the conclusion of that work, the Board of Aldermen was unable to agree on a modified budget within the forty-five day limitation, which made the Mayor's budget effective on July first, since a final vote was postponed until the July 14<sup>th</sup> regular full Board meeting through the exercise of an objection to the taking of a vote on the budget by the Chairman of Finance and three colleagues, Aldermen Albright, Hess-Mahan and Schnipper, pursuant to Section 2-9 of the Newton City Charter. From July through November, the Committee worked to supplement the Mayor's budget in several ways prior to the November 13, 2008 setting of the tax rate. The Chairman of the Finance Committee oversaw the Committee of the Whole meeting on November 13 that recommended to the Board the adoption of a minimum residential factor that providing for the maximum taxation at 175% in commercial and industrial property, minimizing the impact of taxes on residential properties in the City.

### **Financial Audit Sub-Committee and other matters**

While the Committee was completing its work on the new budget, the Financial Audit Sub-Committee, chaired by Alderman **Scott F. Lennon**, continued to work with the auditors regarding the timely reconciliations of cash and receivables and the appropriate filing of the City's reports with the Internal Revenue Service.

The Committee, working with Treasurer/Collector Edward Spellmen, helped rectify some fines which were levied against the City for non-compliance with federal reporting guidelines. The Financial Audit Sub-Committee was also active in the search to select James Reardon as the new Treasurer/Collector for the City of Newton.

Finance Committee members have continued to review the fiscal status of the City, including the City's approximate \$12 million in Free Cash and \$2 million in Budget Reserve in light of economic problems associated with State and Federal Government. New construction, which allows additional tax revenue, has been up as can be seen in new building permits and fees. These amounts have been helpful in responding to both shortages and increased enrollments in the school budget, as well as major increases in fuel surcharges for oil, natural gas, and gasoline.

The Finance Committee has been monitoring an approximate 20% reduction in the City's pension assets which are under control of the State pension authority. The pension funds are still in a strong financial position with hopes the stock market will turn around and investments will return to normal levels. In addition, Alderman Ken Parker is chairing an informal working group examining the City's post-retirement health care liability.

To end the year, the Finance Committee members dealt with requests for supplemental expenditures and ongoing work with the Executive Department to ensure that in January 2009 the SBA reimbursements first payment of approximately \$23 million will be received in order to continue construction of Newton North High School on schedule.

### **Real Property Reuse Committee**

The **Real Property Reuse Committee** reviews the sale or lease of City property. The Chairman was **Carleton Merrill**; and the Vice-chairman was **William Brandel**. The Committee was supported by Committee Clerk **Linda Finucane**, and by Assistant City Solicitor **Eileen McGettigan**.

In May, the Committee and Board approved an amendment to Sec. 2-7, Sale or lease of city owned real property, to allow the requirements of that section not otherwise required by law or by charter to be waived in whole or in part by a two-thirds ( 2/3) vote of the Board of Aldermen.

### **Post Audit and Oversight Committee**

The **Post Audit and Oversight Committee** looks back to see if what has been promised has in fact been achieved. Its Chairman is **Susan Albright**; the Vice-chairman was **Greer Tan Swiston**, and it is staffed by **Shawna Sullivan** of the Clerk's Office.

This year the Committee discussed several reports from the Commissioner of Public Buildings regarding why limited progress has been made on the execution of the construction project database approved by the Board of Aldermen on April 20, 2004. Commissioner Parnell has met with the Committee several times this year and provided updates on the progress of the database. It is being populated with City construction projects that are completed and the Commissioner will be working with the School Department to acquire additional material for the database.

The Committee also received regular updates on the implementation of speed zone and truck exclusion ordinances adopted by the Board of Aldermen but not approved by the State. All of the speed zone and truck exclusion ordinances are now in accordance with what the State has approved. The Committee has also discussed the status of renovations and health and safety repairs to the fire stations. The health and safety repairs are complete; however, the renovations are an ongoing project and will take a few years to complete.

## **Committee on Community Preservation**

Finally, **The Committee on Community Preservation**, which recommends how we spend funds for open space, affordable housing, recreation, and historic preservation generated by one per cent of property taxes paid in the City matched by state funds raised under the Community Preservation Act. The Committee Chairman was **Cheryl Lappin** and the Vice-chairman was **Ken Parker**. The Committee was supported by Committee Clerk **Karyn Dean**. City Staff who helped the Committee on Community Preservation include Community Preservation Committee staff member **Alice Ingerson**, Comptroller **David Wilkinson**, City Solicitor **Dan Funk**, former Associate City Solicitor **Catherine Farrell**, Parks and Recreation Commissioner **Fran Towle**, and **Carol Stapleton**.

## **Newton Heritage Landscape Inventory**

The Community Preservation Committee brought a proposal to the Aldermanic Committee on Community Preservation to compile an inventory of historic landscapes in the City. A consultant would identify a list of priority resources and nominations from the community would be solicited. Newton would be the first community to do this type of inventory on its own. The document could be used for several purposes including decision making regarding CPA funding, as well as an important component of the City's recreation and open space plan. This list could also be the first step in applying for an historic designation on the National Historic Register which would help preserve Newton's historic character.

## **Homebuyers Assistance Program**

The City of Newton's homebuyer assistance programs have successfully made over \$4 million of properties affordable and helped individuals, people with disabilities, and families achieve homeownership. The programs serve people with gross incomes below 80 percent of the Boston area median income. Applicants must also be either a first time homebuyer (or a displaced homemaker), or have a connection to Newton such as work in Newton, live in Newton, or have a child in a school in Newton. The programs are funded by federal programs (CDBG and HOME) as well as local Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds. The Community Preservation Committee came before the Committee on Community Preservation to request about \$950,000 in CPA funds to accommodate more deserving and

qualified homebuyers over the next 2 years. The Committee felt this was important work in order to keep Newton a diverse and welcoming community, and supported this request.

### **230 Lake Avenue**

In order to provide the residents of Newton with a more unified beach front at Crystal Lake, the City acquired property at 230 Lake Avenue. The acquisition included 8,423 square feet of land, an easement that allows for passage along the waterfront, a conservation restriction along the waterfront, and a preservation restriction on the front façade of the house at 230 Lake Avenue. The easement would connect the public park to Levingston Cove, allowing pedestrian access along the lake. The Committee on Community Preservation felt that it was an appropriate and compelling use of CPA funds in order to create a lakeside park in roughly the center of the City that could be used by all of Newton's residents.

### **City Archives**

The City Clerk's office is the repository of the vital records for the City of Newton. These documents are precious and irreplaceable and were in need of protection and restoration. The Committee on Community Preservation felt that it was imperative to support this effort. New rolling shelves were installed in the vault and handwritten and typed records from as far back as 1853 were professionally restored and the pages encased in Mylar. These vital records were also been scanned into the computer for easier reference, which also allows for less handling of the books to aid in preservation. Fireproof cabinetry was added to replace old wooden bookshelves and several City atlases in the Engineering vault were restored, encapsulated and scanned as well. This effort should ensure that these vital records remain as accurate historical documents for hundreds of years to come.

### **Long Range Planning Committee**

The **Special Committee on Long Range Planning** investigates how the Board can improve its efficiency and effectiveness. Its Chairman is **Ted Hess-Mahan** and its vice chairman is President Emeritus **Verne Vance**.

In 2006, the Committee, in conjunction with the Mayor's Office, was instrumental in convening the Blue Ribbon Commission on Newton's Finances and, in 2007, reintroducing an annually updated long range financial forecast to assist in planning to meet the City's needs. The joint efforts of the Committee and the Mayor's Office helped lay a foundation for the ground-breaking work of the Blue Ribbon Commission, as well as the Citizens Advisory Group, as noted above, appointed jointly in 2008 by the Mayor, President of the Board of Aldermen, and Chair of the School Committee, "to assist in planning for additional tactics and strategies to improve the City's operational efficiency and effectiveness in future fiscal years including the functions of the Executive, School Committee, and Aldermanic branches of Newton's government." In 2008, the Committee built on the foundation of its previous efforts and accomplishments by continuing to focus on long term financial and strategic planning initiatives, enhancing staff and volunteer support for aldermanic initiatives, reviewing the management and organization of aldermanic committees, and improving communication, about which I will say more below.

More specifically, this past year, the Committee has focused on development of a long range strategic plan for the City's operating and capital needs, more effective integration of the five-year budget forecast with the budget and strategic plan, the use of performance management and budgeting, and reporting annually to the public on the City's progress on achieving the goals set forth in its long range strategic plan. It has also focused on reviewing the roles and responsibilities of assistant clerks and support staff, exploring the appointment of a volunteer citizens' commission with specialized skills and expertise to advise and assist the Board in developing and dealing with various docket items, and offering continuing education opportunities to aldermen and personnel in the Clerk's Office and the Comptroller's Office, which provide assistance and support for the Board's activities. In addition, the Committee considered possible re-organization and/or delegation of responsibilities of aldermanic committees, and coordination of the roles of the Long Range Planning and the Post Audit and Oversight Committees of the Board. Finally, the Committee continues to work on improving communications between the Board of Aldermen and the other branches of City government, the media and the public, and making aldermanic meetings, agendas, committee reports, and supporting documentation more accessible to the public through the City's website.

In 2009, the Committee will work on continuing to address the issues raised by both the Blue Ribbon Commission and the Citizens Advisory Group, and implementing its recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Board of Aldermen, as well as its other ongoing initiatives.

## **Some things to come**

I have three sets of issues I want to address as we go forward: a word about the Board, the citizens we serve, and our colleagues in Newton government.

### **The Board**

We have made strides over the last few years in making the Board more visible and effective. The change in the work of the Traffic Council at the end of the last term is one example.

We also want to be helpful to citizens in understanding how Newton government works for them. Thanks to NewTV and Mr. Olson, the quality of our televised meetings is better, and we are in the process of getting a new sound system to make the broadcasts clearer. I invite members of the Board with further ideas to share them with me, or Alderman Hess-Mahan who is chairman of the Long Range Planning Committee, where ideas are incubated before they are docketed as formal items for action. In a time of challenges, it is especially incumbent on us to model civility for our citizens and be prepared to explain our actions.

Along those lines, I am pleased to report that thanks to NewTV and **Jesse Kreitzer**, NewTV's coordinator of government programming, and his colleague cameraman **Richard Berman**, viewers of the government channel will have more background on the work we do in Committee as well as in the full Board, especially since so much of what we do in committee is voted at the outset of our meetings at first call. Starting sometime later this month, on the Red Channel, the same one viewers are seeing this meeting on tonight, we will have 15 to 30 minute interviews with the leadership of the various committees of the Board, as well as our Clerk of the Board, Mr. Olson, and our Comptroller, Mr. Wilkinson, about what they do in the various committees I described earlier tonight. The series is called

Aldermen-at-Work, and will be shown at 7:30 on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings. We hope you find them informative. If they prove helpful, we may expand them to include other topics.

In addition, we hope soon to have the ability for citizens to view Board meetings on-line and link to specific portions of the agenda.

## **Our Citizens**

Foremost in our attention must always be the 84,000 citizens we serve. Every vote we take, everything we do, must always focus on how we can best serve them, our constituents.

Newton is fortunate in that despite the current economic downturn, median single-family home sale prices have held relatively constant, including the data through November of this year, indicating that Newton is still broadly regarded a very desirable place to live. Money Magazine included Newton among the 50 most desirable small cities in which to live in America. We want to continue to ensure that it is a welcoming community, and initiatives like improving the low-income housing inclusionary zoning ordinance, likely to be forthcoming soon, are important additional steps.

We will soon receive the reports of the Citizen Advisory Committee. It is important to hear its recommendations and take them seriously. The Committee's advice and that of others will offer us a chance to re-examine how we do things in Newton and lay the foundation for an even more effective government. I anticipate asking the CAG, when it completes its work, to report to the Board at a time and place when the Mayor, the School Committee, and interested citizens can hear the Committee's ideas. The next few months, as we look forward to new leadership in the Executive Department, offer us an important opportunity for the future of Newton. At the same time, despite our differences of opinion from time to time, we owe Mayor David Cohen our gratitude for 11 years of honorable stewardship of our beloved City for which he clearly cares so deeply.

That brings me to our valued colleagues in government, our employees.

## **Our Colleagues in Government: Our Employees**

In a time of transition in elective office, the City's employees are the core of continuity for our City. The City of Newton has over three thousand municipal and school employees who serve the eighty-four thousand residents of Newton. These employees educate our children, protect us from fire or crime, enforce our laws, maintain our water and sewer lines, keep up our public buildings, care for our parks and playgrounds, repair our roads, and plow our streets, often with less and less to work with. We see some of them in action, but often we just catch a glimpse of them as we come, or they go. And that does not count the many people who serve the City who may be invisible to citizens because they work behind the scenes. I have already mentioned several individuals who have helped the Board do its work, such as staffs of the Clerk of the Board, the Comptroller, the Law Department, or the Planning Department. But we should also recognize those in other departments, like Assessing, Public Buildings, Purchasing, Information Technology, or Human Resources, and many more too numerous to mention, in both the city government and school department who enable those more visible employees on the front lines in turn to do what they do. Sometimes we honor them when they retire, but that does not capture their contribution while they are among us. But at a time when job security and working conditions may be as important as raises to our employees, especially when we are in a recessionary and deflationary

economy, we need to provide our employees both the training to do even better and the equipment they need to do it. We also need to begin funding the obligation we have to assure them the health care they have earned when they do retire, and capture their best ideas and experience before they leave. As the City's elected representatives, we need to thank them, and for them to feel appreciated, even if we can not easily recognize all of them individually.

I believe one of our Massachusetts poets, Marge Piercy, has summed up what I mean about our municipal and school employees in her poem: **"To be of Use."** Let me quote a few lines:

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows....  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

\* \* \*

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

\* \* \*

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.

The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

As we go forward this year, I believe it is important that the members of the Board somehow periodically help recognize our employees who exemplify being "of use" to our citizens, and "the thing worth doing well done." So I am asking Alderman Johnson, because of her experience in Human Resources, to work with me and Vice-President Lennon over the next few weeks to help establish a process and criteria for expressing our appreciation, and I invite your suggestions to us on how best to proceed.

Newton is much more diverse than is generally perceived, but whatever our village, we share a concern for our City and its welfare, because its welfare and its citizens are linked. At the same time, the challenges we face will not be easy to overcome, but they can be done if we work together to maintain and enhance the excellence in City services and education that is Newton's hallmark.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

R. Lisle Baker, President